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Pat Steffens

Susan Williams

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, swilliams1@unl.edu

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What Kids Really Need Are Adults Who C.A.R.E.

by Pat Steffens and Susan Williams, Extension Family Science Educators

Young people need caring, principled adults in their lives who support them, encourage them, and guide them. They need places to be — home, school, neighborhood, congregation, work — that are accepting, affirming, and safe.

— Peter L. Benson, Search Institute

There's an old African proverb: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." In other words, children are best off when every adult member of a community is willing to pitch in to protect their best interests. It's not enough for young people to hear a positive supportive, message at home *or* at school *or* in the community. *They need to hear the same message reinforced in all areas of their lives.*

We live in a world in which young people are increasingly vulnerable. We're worried about our own kids, our neighbors' kids, the students in our classrooms, the youth in our congregations, and kids as a whole. We've watched the news and read the stories and the appalling facts about violence, school failure, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicide. It's frightening, frustrating, and depressing, but it doesn't have to be that way.

The Search Institute analyzed a nationwide survey involving more than 273,000 students.^{[1](#)} It was discovered that the difference between troubled youth and those leading healthy, productive, positive lives was strongly affected by the presence of **developmental assets**; developmental strengths that are the building blocks for human development in a young person's life. They provide a sense of security. They are resources upon which a child can draw again and again. And they're cumulative, meaning that *the more a young person has, the better* (p.3). They identified 30 assets.

The first 16 are **external assets** (p.3):

1. Family support

2. Parents as social resources
3. Parent communication
4. Other adult resources
5. Other adult communication
6. Parent involvement in school
7. Positive school climate
8. Parental standards
9. Parental discipline
10. Parental monitoring
11. Time at home
12. Positive peer influence
13. Music
14. Extracurricular activities
15. Community activities
16. Involvement with a faith community

The next 14 are **internal assets** — attitudes, values, and competencies that belong in the head and heart of every child. These internal assets are (p.4):

17. Achievement motivation
18. Educational aspiration
19. School performance
20. Homework
21. Helping people
22. Global concern
23. Empathy
24. Sexual restraint
25. Assertiveness skills
26. Decision-making skills
27. Friendship-making skills
28. Planning skills
29. Self-esteem
30. Hope

Whether you're a parent, a teacher, a community leader, a religious leader, or just an adult who wants to help kids, you can start building assets today. Most of these assets cost nothing in terms of money. Many are things you may already be doing. Despite the best efforts of concerned and involved adults, not every young person will end up with all 30 assets, but it's important to remember that *the more assets a young person has, the better off they are.*

The Challenge

Community organizations can and should be powerful supporters for building assets in young people. As Marian Wright Edelman writes:

The greatest threat to our national security and future comes from no external enemy but from the enemy within — in our loss of strong, moral family and community values and support... ²

A *positive* approach to youth development is not about stopping or preventing problems. It's about investing wisely in our youth, increasing their exposure to positive, constructive activities, and instilling

values and skills that will guide them from the inside. Building assets is not a quick fix. It will take time and commitment from adults who C.A.R.E.

Communicate:

Rule number one is that you must be a *good listener*. Being a good listener is more than simply not interrupting the speaker. It's hearing *and* trying to understand. Talk **with** a child — not to, at, or for him or her. This is a tricky skill for most adults. It means foregoing lectures, judgments, guilt trips, and assumptions. It means really wanting to know and understand a child's perspective, even though it may be very different from your own. **Listening** is the first step in developing understanding and solving problems.

Affirm, appreciate, and acknowledge:

Affirm and appreciate the healthy choices that youth make. Provide opportunities for young people to model healthy behavior for one another. Helping others through community service is one way to set a great example. Acknowledge and honor young role models in your group, congregation, and community.

Respect and Responsibility:

Adults should be role models. If we expect children to respect us, we need to respect them. Mutual respect can help build the trust and understanding needed for developing responsible behavior. In order to develop responsibility, children must be allowed the opportunity to be responsible. Teaching children to be responsible is a two-step process. The first step is to model the behavior. The second step is to acknowledge the performance, attitude, and effort. Kids need the opportunity to be responsible, and it should be given to them as early as possible.

Encourage and empower:

Encourage and empower a child to develop their own character. Encourage responsible behavior. **Empowerment** refers to **turning control over to young people as soon as possible so they have power over their own lives**. It will help them grow to be responsible young adults instead of dependent rebellious people. Empowerment is the primary step toward taking responsibility for their behavior and the resulting consequences.

The journey is as important as the destination. The fact that people are discussing and devoting time and energy to focus on youth issues can have a fundamental impact on the way a community views and treats its children — and on the way youth view themselves.

Young people need a set of social competencies or life skills to thrive. As you explore working for positive change, you may find the need to develop programs to address unmet needs. Some examples might include:

- Positive places with constructive activities for young people after school or in the evenings.
- A youth advisory group that gives a youth voice to city or school policy.

- Opportunities for youth to build skills, enhance their education, and nourish their creativity through community-wide tutoring or mentoring programs.
- Peer helping programs in which youth learn skills to provide care and support to each other.
- Opportunities for recreation, athletics, or socializing with friends.
- Programs that seek to engage all ages to rebuild relationships across generations.

As you start thinking about asset-building, expect to find many other ways to provide positive support for the young people in your community. Get together with your family, friends, and neighbors to plan ways to try these ideas in your community. Brainstorm your own ideas. Most kids really want to stay out of trouble and succeed in life. When they understand how powerful these assets can be, they may decide to get more involved in shaping their own future.

When kids come from strong families and strong communities — when they're surrounded by caring, loving people and systems of support — not much keeps them from building assets and benefiting from the positive opportunities they will encounter in life.

Building Assets on Your Own

Whether or not you work directly with youth, there are many ways in which you can have a positive impact on one child or a group of youth. Some possibilities include:

- Giving the children in your life the love, time, attention, structure, nurturing, and resources they need.
- Being friendly and interested when you see children or teenagers.
- Taking responsibility for children in your neighborhood, particularly those without adequate networks of support.
- Sharing parenting experiences as a volunteer mentor to a young, inexperienced parent.
- Starting a neighborhood "safe house" where kids can go if they need help.
- Volunteering to serve as a youth group leader or coach.
- Mentoring a student in the community.
- Showing appreciation to young people who contribute to the community through service.
- Voting with children and youth in mind. Urge elected officials to make young people a top priority.

Resources

1. Peter L. Benson, Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espeland, *What Kids Need to Succeed* (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1995).
2. Wright-Edelman, Marian, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter To My Children and Yours* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1993), pp. 19-20.

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